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Paula Dunn's proudest moment as Olivia Breen and Bethany Woodward win bronze in the T35-T38 4x100m relay at the 2012 Paralympic Games alongside Jenny McLoughlin and Katrina Hart

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BLAZER

Paula Dunn became UK Athletics' first ever female head coach in late 2012. With the Rio 2016 Paralympic Games drawing closer, Caroline Roberts went to see how the former sprinter was handling the build-up.



The London 2012 Games saw the most successful Paralympics ever, and one which achieved mass-market appeal for disabled sport.

The GB athletics squad played a central role, winning 11 gold medals – a huge step up from the two golds won in Beijing four years earlier.

It's a hard act to follow. But Paula Dunn, who took over as Paralympics head coach in November 2012, is equal to the challenge. The former GB sprinter, who served as right-hand woman to head coach Peter Eriksson in the last Olympic cycle, now looks to not only repeat that success in Rio next year, but to exceed it.

Since taking on the role, she has continued to build on the talent identification and development structure put in place by her predecessor. 'We now have a really robust pathway, which we didn't have in the past,' she says. 'In 2009, we had fewer than 100 >>



Dunn coached Stef Reid to silver in the F44 long jump at the 2012 Paralympic Games

» athletes but now we have in excess of 800. That's something I'm really proud of.'

Currently, 51 athletes receive funding; 25 of whom have definite podium potential for Rio. But the first female head coach appointed by UK Athletics is under no illusions as to the difficulty of the task ahead. The governing body has set a target of 12 gold medals. In London, four of the golds were won by David Weir, the wheelchair athlete, who isn't

'I may be the head coach but I'm just one of the guys on the day. I carry water, I tie laces, I put girls' hair in buns.'

guaranteed to replicate that haul in Rio at the age of 37.

'We need to ensure that we never get complacent and think it will just happen. We're making sure the profile of the sport stays high and we're really lucky in track and field as we have some athletes who are seen as mainstream stars now. That makes it easier for us to keep pushing it,' says Dunn.

Greater public awareness means that her team now receives enquiries directly



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the US, French and Brazilian Paralympic teams, they reflect the diversity of their Olympic teams, so it looks like it's a particular quirk for us.'

But things are beginning to change. 'We now have a black and an Asian wheelchair athlete on the funding programme. It's about role models. If you see someone who looks like you then you think: that could be an opportunity for me, so we need to get those athletes highly visible. That's something I'm working really hard at.'

Dunn began her coaching career with UK Athletics in 2001 and in 2005 she was asked to coach a young sprinter with cerebral palsy. To begin with, the transition to working with a disabled athlete wasn't easy. 'I thought, he's a sprinter and I can coach speed so that's fine. Then I found I needed to slow things down and learn different ways of coaching. I've had to do lots of learning, reading, courses and self-questioning.'

'They are athletes, but with a disability we have to work around. Their pathway may look slightly different to everybody else's but they still have a dream to become the best they can be and our role is to help them to do that.'

It was her own coach, the late Jim Harris, who helped form her coaching philosophy. 'He made me the person I am today, definitely. He was always really humble and went to every coaching course, even though he was producing medallists. And those were the days when you had to pay to go on courses.'

She credits Eriksson for her later development as a coach and as a leader. 'I learnt from the best,' she says. >>

from parents of promising young athletes, and from schools. But there's still work to be done. 'A child with minimal disabilities is easily overlooked as someone who's a bit clumsy or slow. But the reality is that child in that mainstream class could be our future star. It's about getting that message across.'

Her biggest bugbear is a lack of diversity; the 2012 squad was predominantly white and middle class. 'If you look at

PAULA'S TOP COACHING TIPS

Learn from others. Anyone could have a little nugget that could make you a better coach. I listen to everybody.

Have a development plan. If your ambition is to coach a major team, you need to set out your pathway to get there.

Understand your athletes' challenges. For example, with cerebral palsy, the energy the athletes expend in just moving around is enormous. When they come to you at the end of the day they are physically and mentally tired and you have to take that into account.

For athletes with learning disabilities, it's little and often. Tell them one thing and keep reinforcing that one thing before you move on to another.

I always say: do what you need to do to achieve your goal, rather than what you want to do. It's always need, and not want.

'The athletes say that, because I'm so nice, when I'm serious it's really effective.'

© Andrew Boyers/Action Images Limited



Hannah Cockroft won gold medals in the T34 100m and 200m at the London 2012 Paralympic games

» ‘He encouraged me to apply for the job. Without him I wouldn’t be having this conversation.’

But she brings much of her own personality to the role too. ‘The athletes say that, because I’m so nice, when I’m serious it’s really effective. I just say: “You said you were going to do this, but you didn’t and that’s really disappointing.” That’s more effective than getting angry. I can be hard when it’s necessary, but it’s not my natural tendency.’

She also brings her experience as a top athlete. ‘You can be very confident when you’re with your coach, but when you leave them you have 45 minutes before you are

on the track. You get negative thoughts, and you get scared. I understand that journey. I can empathise with an athlete when they’re really nervous.

‘I may be the head coach but I’m just one of the guys on the day. I carry water, I tie laces, I put girls’ hair in buns – you have to do everything possible to make sure each athlete is not distracted. That’s one of the things I’ve learnt over the years when I was competing. It’s all about the athlete – this is their moment.’

As the run-up to Rio gathers pace, the demands on Paula’s time will increase, but she is determined to spend as much time as possible with the athletes. At the moment, she is

in Loughborough from Monday to Wednesday, on Thursday she works from home in Manchester, and on Friday she flits between London, Cardiff and Bath. ‘I don’t want to be a head coach who’s always in the office. In my previous role, I worked really closely with the athletes so I’ve tried really hard to keep those connections going.’

Ultimately, her aim is to leave Rio knowing that there’s absolutely nothing else her coaching team could have done to get an extra medal. She’s also confident there will be athletes who unexpectedly burst late on to the scene, as 100m gold medallist Jonnie Peacock did in 2012. ‘When we have our meeting with the athletes I say that somebody will step up, surprise themselves and surpass what was expected. They have the opportunity and they have to grab it.’ **CE**

DUNN’S PROUDEST MOMENTS...

... as an athlete

When I won a bronze in the 100m at the 1994 Commonwealth Games, and ran my fastest time ever.

... and as a coach

The cerebral palsy women’s relay team winning bronze at the London 2012 Games. When I said I was going to coach a CP women’s relay team everybody laughed at me. They said we wouldn’t be able to get the baton around, but that just made me want to do it even more. I made a plan and we stuck to it.



Dunn and some of her athletes before the 2013 IPC World Championships

THE COACH'S EDGE

Since the main route into coaching is through former participants, the more women playing sport, the greater the base of potential women coaches within the best pathway into coaching.

Governing bodies of sport and national agencies need to work collectively to raise the profile of female coaches and their successes. Women coaches also need to recognise that they can inspire others to follow in their footsteps and they are well positioned to help make this happen.

There are governing bodies of sport in the UK and internationally who have taken the policy decision to employ only women coaches to work with women's teams/athletes to good effect. This approach enables women to challenge the assumption that the best coach for the job will always be a man and should, therefore, encourage more women to put themselves forward for coaching jobs.

It is important female coaches are allowed to focus on coaching. They should not be expected to take on additional roles (eg as chaperone) simply because of their gender.

Identifying, supporting and encouraging female coaching talent is essential. It is also important to recognise that, as with talent identification and female athletes, support in this area may not mirror that provided to male counterparts.

In addition to formal coach education, female coaches identified a desire for more continuing professional development (CPD), informal learning and mentoring opportunities to help them improve and develop as coaches.

The creation of networks that allow women to learn from and support each other has been cited by coaches as a way of encouraging more women to progress in coaching.

Make sure your organisation has the policies and codes of conduct in place to ensure the coaching environment is free from discrimination or harassment. There should also be effective guidelines in place to ensure grievances can be handled appropriately, sensitively and professionally at whatever level is being coached.

THIS GIRL CAN

sports coach UK is proud to be supporting the This Girl Can campaign by tackling the gender imbalance in coaching.

The aim is to recruit 3000 new female coaches across the UK in the next two years, impacting on about 50,000 women in sport.

The project will be delivered through four inter-connected tactics:

Awareness and Recruitment - guidance on improving recruitment processes in coaching, including how to reach prospective female coaches and encourage them to put themselves forward.

Development of sustainable network of support - Support and guidance to develop and deliver local networking events.

Accessible learning and qualifications - Making learning more accessible by addressing the barriers identified in sports coach UK research.

Profile and Brand- Development of merchandise for coaches and those involved in the project to feel part of it. Providing branding materials for local use such as posters and pop-ups.